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978-0-521-10503-3 - Kinship at the Core: An Anthropology of Elmdon a Village in North-west Essex in the Nineteen-Sixties

Marilyn Strathern

Excerpt

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I

The idea of a village

One attraction which Elmdon in the sixties held for newcomers to the area was that it could be called, in the enthusiastic phrase of a recent arrival, “a proper village”.¹ Indeed, its sixteenth- and seventeenth-century dwellings, running along quiet lanes in an obvious state of good repair and habitation are still suggestive of tradition. Older Elmdon residents speak of continuities which, however, have less to do with architecture and physical remains than with their own links to families of long standing. Fifteen years ago, half the inhabitants belonged by birth to the village or had married into families known to have been in the village for fifty years or more, and many had surnames which could be found in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century records.

This account describes Elmdon in the early 1960s.² Since then the village has undergone changes, some of which are discussed in the Epilogue. The bulk of our information thus refers to a specific period already past. Many of the views and perceptions recorded then will have had their origin in conditions particular to that time and to the circumstances of those who helped us with our enquiries. But the picture which people drew of their village also involved ideas which can be said in a more general way to belong to English culture at large.³ It is these ideas with which we are ultimately concerned.

Elmdon is small – 321 people in 1964 – and lies tucked away on the Essex–Cambridgeshire border, escaping the conurbations which pursue the A10 flanking it to the west and the A11 to the east. But its isolation is partly a matter of self-image (see figure 1); London is only fifty miles away, and there is a mainline station within minutes’ driving distance from Elmdon. Undulating fields and belts of woodland conceal the other twenty-four named villages (ranging in size from under 100 inhabitants to over 1,000) within five miles of Elmdon, and the town of Saffron Walden

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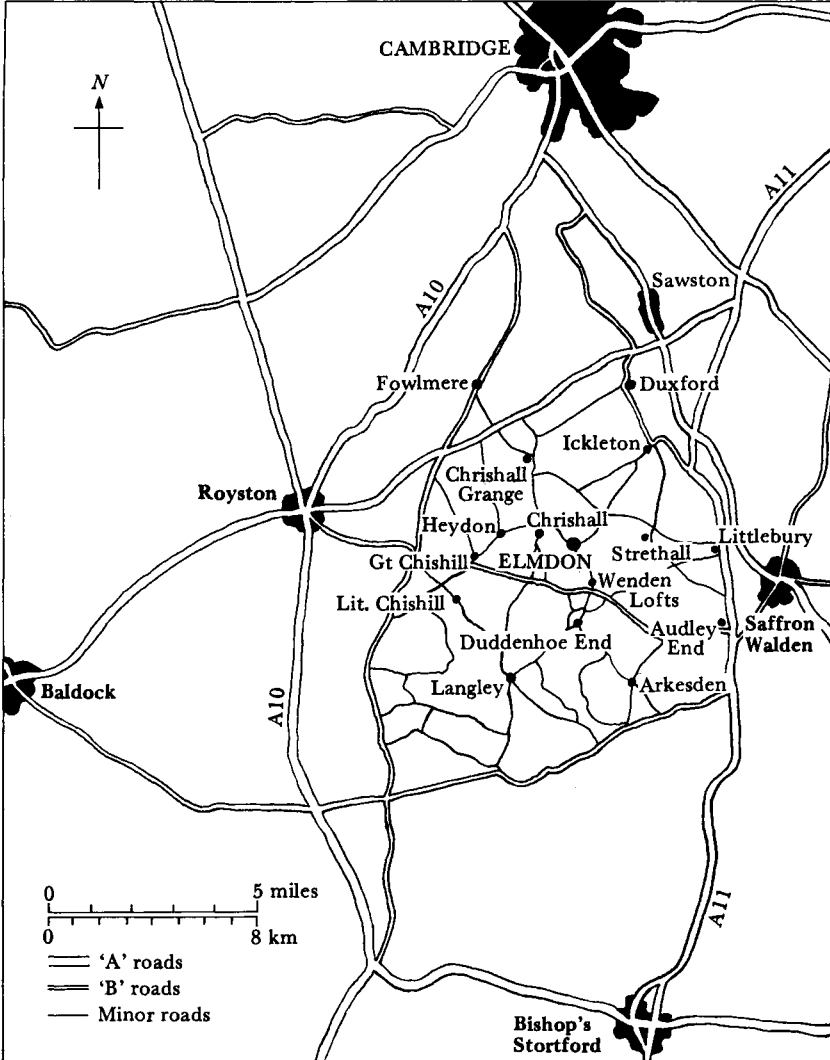


Figure 1. Map of Elmdon, its neighbouring villages and towns, 1964

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(8,000) lies on the edge of this radius. In this locality men travel to see relatives or visit pubs, lorries collect women to pick peas and lift potatoes, and there has always been intermarriage. Yet it is Elmdon's distinctiveness that these same people talk about, rather than any merging with its several similar neighbours. The sense of Elmdon as 'a village' is summed up in the notion that residents can be divided into those who belong, the 'real Elmdon', and 'outsiders' or 'newcomers' with no such claim. Newcomers generally concur: active as they may become in village affairs, they do not regard themselves as 'villagers'.

In 1964 fewer of the old cottages had been renovated than were to have been by the end of the 1970s. They were spoken of as having been lived in by Elmdon people for generations. But even then a constant topic of conversation was the number of strangers living in the village, typified in the complaint of one council roadman that the village had so changed there were people "I don't even know". He could point to only two persons in King's Lane who, in his estimation, were not strangers. If newcomers had brought change, they had also sharpened the image of the traditional Elmdon villager as coming from those long-established families who comprised the community's solid core. As will become apparent, however, what people perceive in terms of history, a village with a core of traditional families and the accretions of immigrants, is not necessarily to be accounted for in purely historical terms. The year 1964 has long since gone. But perhaps it is not really any more remote than the belief that Elmdon is the self-contained community it sometimes presents itself as.

'Real Elmdon'

Anyone who has visited Elmdon soon discovers that simply living there does not make one a village person. To newcomers the typical villager may exemplify a vague constellation of attributes, such as long association, an otherwise narrow horizon, rural born and bred. He also belongs to a rather specific category, as immigrants come to realise. Residents of all kinds link together the idea that the old village families have a long history in Elmdon with the supposition that their present-day members are closely connected through ties of blood and marriage. The man who complained about King's Lane reckoned that a third of the village were his relatives. Of the football club in which he is active he

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asserted that everyone in the team was related,⁴ and: “We’re a jolly lot of people in the village – we have a good time. Everybody knows everybody else, and we all muck in.” One of a pair of sisters who fifty years before had married into Elmdon from Great Chishill, two to three miles away, laughingly admitted, “We’re all relatives here.” Her husband’s family not only provides the most common surname in the village but, a generation before, had made several marriages with other Elmdon families. He himself commented that the “stain of Hammond blood” was to be found throughout the village.

Villagers indeed seem to be embedded in a kinship network. The day-to-day contacts of the council worker’s younger sister, who had persuaded her husband to live with her in Elmdon, include the following relatives: her mother and father, just across the road; her two brothers and their wives, one of whom lives next door and the other not far away; an adopted daughter of her grandmother, near to her in age, whose house is about a mile away; a cousin (FZD),⁵ like herself settled in Elmdon, at the other end of the village; and her grandmother (MM) three houses away. There are occasional calls on an aunt (FZ) also in Elmdon, and a mother’s sister outside the village, whom she visits by car. Many other relatives with whom she could trace a connection also live in the village.

The kinship which binds ‘villagers’ together is often experienced by outsiders as a boundary. The widow of an immigrant labourer who had moved in forty years before remembered how she had had to be careful to whom she spoke since ‘they’ were all related. But boundaries are drawn in different places. A woman from one of the earliest commuting families to set up residence in Elmdon (in the 1940s) reflected that then her family had been the only people who had come in from ‘the outside’: “That’s where we made our mistake, of course. We really put our foot in it once or twice. Everybody in the village is related, and if you say something about someone they say – that’s my uncle! That was our mistake, and we never really got over that. People are not very sociable round here.” Both these outsiders are using the same idiom – village people are internally related – but what they mean by ‘village people’ is not quite the same. The one had come from Saffron Walden, the other from beyond East Anglia; the former would no doubt call himself working class and the latter middle class; and while each thinks of the village as an exclusive body of

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relatives, the second outsider was actually including the first as belonging to that 'village'.

Feelings of belonging can grow with time. The widow completed her remark with the qualification that she now felt herself one of the village. A couple, one of them married into Elmdon from elsewhere, signify their popularity by saying that they are 'aunt and uncle' to everyone. But apart from people's feelings of identity with the village and its concerns, there is a notion of belonging which is more narrowly based. Neither length of time in the village nor diffuse connections through marriage and a ramifying network of kin alone qualify as criteria by which a person is counted 'real Elmdon'. Out of the amorphous and generalising image that 'villagers' are all related, there is a precise equation between being a 'real' villager and being a birth member of one of the 'old' Elmdon families.

In 1964 there were two Mrs Hammonds in the village, both known affectionately as Lizzie, though their name sharing was as fortuitous as the fact that they were living almost opposite each other. The Hammonds into which they were married were thought of as quite separate families, one of them 'real Elmdon' and the other of recent origin.⁶ Each had rather definite things to say about her own position.

The older Mrs Hammond was brought to Elmdon when she was five. Her father, Henry Clark, set up residence there with his large family in about 1888; in a short space of time he became vigorously involved in local affairs as churchwarden and renowned as a cricketer. Apart from a period in service near London, Lizzie had spent most of her life in Elmdon. A "real village person" was the opinion of a commuter's wife living two or three houses away.

Lizzie's⁷ own views were the opposite. She denied she was Elmdon: "I come from Heydon."⁸ Her husband, she said, was an Elmdon man, but as far as her children's marriages had been concerned, she did not "fancy Elmdon people" (for them). Certainly all had found spouses outside, though in five of the eight cases these came from within seven or eight miles of Elmdon, including Duddenhoe End, the other village/hamlet within Elmdon parish. But distances of this order are crucial. The Heydon which Lizzie Clark Hammond⁹ so valued as her village of origin lies over a spur of hilly land not three miles away. When she was ill and confined to her house, she asked to be taken to see her birthplace before

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she died, a journey she had, it was said, never undertaken in former years. She had to be carried to the car. At Heydon she searched for the wall of the dwelling on which her father had once carved a C. And as for Elmdon, she declared she knew nothing about the village, she — who had resided there seventy-five years — was “a stranger really”. She said that her father had been a blacksmith, although on another occasion she referred to herself as a farmer’s daughter (i.e. as coming from a family with farming connections). She insisted she should not be taken for a “native”.

The other Lizzie Hammond is a granddaughter, on her father’s side, of an Elmdon bricklayer, from an old-established craftsman family, the Greenhills. Her mother had been an “Elmdon woman”.¹⁰ She herself was born in the village and has rarely left it. A brother and his descendants still live here, but there are no others from her father’s side, and none on her mother’s. Perhaps this is why her opening remark was that she thinks of herself as a Hammond now. But her husband was not a village man; on various occasions she described him as from Duddenhoe End, or Langley (where he was brought up) less than a mile from the parish boundary. He moved to Elmdon when they married in 1920. In stressing his origins she was denying that he was a villager, and it is worth noting that her father’s family, though long established in the village, are not generally referred to as real Elmdon either. At the same time she did imply she had some access to knowledge about Elmdon affairs in contrast with her sister-in-law who had been in the village only forty odd years: the latter was a “newcomer” who did not know anything about Elmdon; she was not born in the village, “more married into, I think”. The sister-in-law was present when Mrs Hammond made these remarks, and agreed with her that she did not know anything about Elmdon.

In the comments of both the Mrs Hammonds, birth seems a significant marker of village status. Mrs Clark Hammond’s daughter was very certain about this. Real Elmdon people have to be born as well as live there she asserted. Her own husband comes from Duddenhoe End, and it is further remembered that his family moved there in his father’s lifetime; he himself has been settled in Elmdon thirty years, but is “nothing to do with the village”. Although birthplace thus looks like a simple reference to locality, in fact the issue of birth is the issue of *family* origin. What is important is not where a person happened to be when he or she was born, but where a family’s roots are supposed to be. New-

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comers to the village, called ‘Londoners’, ‘weekenders’ or ‘strangers’, readily set themselves off as ‘outsiders’ against ‘village people’ whom they regard as somehow tied to the locality. Village people themselves can use the same set of idioms to distinguish between real and not real Elmdoners on the basis of family affiliation.

The villages of origin by which persons are identified do not lead to groups or cliques forming within Elmdon – all those from Heydon, say, do not get together for that reason. Moreover, such designations are not held to affect day-to-day interaction. No one would treat her husband any differently, said Mrs Hammond’s daughter, because he was not an Elmdon man; people might be slow to accept a newcomer, but it does not really make any difference to their behaviour. Rather than Elmdon ties as such, in terms of neighbourliness and cooperation people are influenced through factors which are both more general, such as common occupation or life style, and more particular, such as personal friendships and feuds. This raises the question of why village of origin should be an issue at all.

Referring to one’s village

If the vague notion of villager is concretised in the idea of ‘real villagers’, so the general category of ‘outsider’ can be divided into those who come from named localities around, and those who simply originate from some unspecified and distant source. The former were brought up in an area familiar to Elmdoners, and naming their specific village is suggestive of geographical intimacy. At the same time, on whatever other grounds these people are to be likened to Elmdoners, their distinct origins put them in the camp of strangers and outsiders.

Like nations or regions, villages have reputations of their own. Elmdoners are regarded in some other villages as careful with money, and lucky in their dealings. The ‘village’ here is the set of inhabitants associated with a single settlement area. Administrative parish boundaries are of little relevance, and to all intents and purposes the two settlements within Elmdon parish, Elmdon and Duddenhoe End, are separate villages.¹¹ Elmdon contrasts itself with one neighbour as church to its chapel;¹² it looks down upon another and is looked down upon in turn, a mutuality encapsulated in being ‘Chicago’ to the other’s ‘Bush’. Such differences contribute

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to notions about how villages get on with one another. “If you visited another village, you were thrown out!”

While incomers give voice to the welcome or hostility they have encountered in Elmdon, as individuals they are not really affected by the stereotypes which label their place of origin. Someone from Heydon or Langley is not particularly held to evince Heydon or Langley behaviour. Nor are villages ranked, so there is no prestige attached to coming from one rather than another. Villages are simply differentiated in block terms: enmities or friendships perceived at village level do not to any marked degree appear to influence the status of persons moving between them.

With obvious sentiment people may recall private experiences or personal connections in villages elsewhere. But as a means of social classification, the index of village origin does not necessarily point to an on-going structure in another village of which they are expatriate members. That is, the idiom seems used less to suggest that one is a ‘real villager’ elsewhere than that one simply does not qualify in the present one. There are thus two dimensions to assertions of village identity: whether within Elmdon a person counts as a real villager or not, and whether ‘origins’, a term Elmdoners themselves use, can be traced to another place. As far as the first applies, non-Elmdon status alone may be relevant – Lizzie Greenhill Hammond was perhaps less concerned to pinpoint her husband’s exact origin than illustrate the fact that he was non-Elmdon. If a person comes from the local area, however, it is usual for him to acknowledge a particular village, and others concur in this self-classification. We may reasonably ask *which* village a person associates himself with – place of birth, of upbringing, or longest period of residence?

The background to these ascriptions is a degree of population movement. An influx of outsiders from right outside the region obscures the extent to which immigrants from nearby villages continue to settle in Elmdon, and Elmdoners to move out, as they probably always have done.¹³ Of those immigrants whose occupations roughly overlap with Elmdoners’, some 20 per cent (14 out of 68) have come from within a five-mile radius; the same span also provided 48 per cent (17 out of 38) of the marriage partners of present villagers sought beyond the village itself – i.e. who have moved into Elmdon with their wife or husband. In addition perhaps half the working population of Elmdoners have at some time worked or lived away from Elmdon, a figure which does not take

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into account those who have departed permanently. The idea of 'origins', however, suggests an inalienable status, a unique identification, which may be set against the associations of the moment.

Birth is a kind of shorthand for origins. There are many assertions that to be a real Elmdon person one must have been born there. A retired labourer referred thus to himself. Anyone who knew him would be aware that he had always lived in Elmdon, though he was employed outside the village for a while, and in spite of having dwelt in five or so village houses during his lifetime, he was then occupying the same block where he had been born and his sister still resided. There is no doubt as to his 'real Elmdon' status. And the majority of individuals known as real Elmdon were actually born there. Yet, paradoxically, our best clues come not from cases where such criteria fit the label, but from the odd example which does not fit, and where in spite of apparent qualification on these grounds a different status is claimed.

Mr and Mrs Dyer, in their late sixties, are the only two villagers in King's Lane who are not 'strangers' (see p. 3). Mrs Dyer was born a Hammond, in the village, and is said to have lived all her life in the house they rent. Her husband, Richard, has lived and worked mostly in Elmdon, continuously over the last thirty years, although he spent a period away as a young man. He was also born in Elmdon; but whereas Mrs Dyer is 'real Elmdon', he suggests he is not.

The name Dyer first appears in the parish registers for 1775, but it would be misleading to assume continuity to the four Dyer men in the village in 1964: Richard, his brother Bertram, and their married sons. There were at least two families of this name in the nineteenth century. Richard and Bertram can be traced back to a Thomas Dyer who was buried in the parish in 1838. Records for Duddenhoe End and Elmdon were kept together on a parish basis, and we presume he lived in Duddenhoe End where at least four of his sons were established in the 1870s. A fifth, John, had departed with his wife and children, one of them his namesake. It is almost certain that both Johns, father and son, were born in Duddenhoe End.¹⁴ John junior must have kept up connections there, for that is where Bertram was also born. Richard, more than a decade later, was born in Elmdon. This history is our own construction.

Elmdoners may refer to Dyers in general as having come from Duddenhoe End. But Richard was specific. His "origins", as he put it, were in Arkesden, a village just over the parish border and two

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miles or so beyond Duddenhoe (see figure 1). That was where his parents “came from”: his father he described as a farm labourer in Arkesden and his mother from Langley way. Now we know (see above) that Richard’s grandfather (John senior) and a brother had both married Arkesden girls in the 1840s, and his first son (Richard’s uncle, FB) was born there. In talking of Arkesden as the direction his parents came from, Richard recalls a link through his grandmother (father’s mother) whose birthplace it was and ignores both his father’s place of birth (Duddenhoe End) and his own (Elmdon).

The Dyers help us understand a number of points. First, much of the history here has been pieced together from records of various kinds. Although people may remember where their grandparents were born, detailed genealogies do not extend much beyond this. Indeed, a cousin of Mrs Dyer’s living in Elmdon said she was not at all sure of the connection between Richard and Bertram. The two men did not stress their siblingship. Second, then, in spite of there being four Dyers in the village, they were not particularly singled out by others as ‘a family’.¹⁵ Third, there is no reason why Bertram should have been considered ‘Elmdon’: his son, who was born elsewhere, took up residence in Elmdon when he married, and Bertram retired to live there some of the time with the son and daughter-in-law. Bertram had in fact lived in several villages, and his mobility contrasts with Richard’s long association with Elmdon. Yet Richard’s being born and brought up as well as living there for the last thirty years has not made him an Elmdon person either. Fourth, Richard makes something of a choice out of his affiliations. He plays down the Duddenhoe End connections in favour of Arkesden. Of Dyers still living in Duddenhoe End, he observed first that they were unrelated to him, though subsequently with some vagueness mentioned that he had ‘cousins’ living there as well as in Arkesden.¹⁶ With neither place does he maintain active ties. Indeed, he talked of his relatives as ‘dying out’. So while he is pointing to non-Elmdon origins, he is not linking himself to an active set of people elsewhere. It is a matter of self-identity rather than on-going associations. Finally, apart from illustrating the kinds of intervillage movements to which I referred earlier – all within a few miles of Elmdon – this short history shows us there is nothing automatic about the ascription of birth. Birthplace may be an ultimate criterion of origin, but with relationships traceable through either males or